

CONTROL, DISCIPLINE AND SUBJECTION
IN GEORGE LAMMING'S *IN THE CASTLE OF MY SKIN*

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RESUMO: A falta de poder relacionada ao fato de ser um sujeito de uma colônia Britânica na ilha caribenha de Barbados é um dos tópicos principais do romance debut de George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*. Um romance que espelha o microcosmo da vila onde se passa a história, onde o domínio do administrador permeia as vidas e cultura do local e de seus habitantes. Se a vila é, em si só, considerada o personagem principal da história, como o próprio autor afirma na introdução da edição de 1983, essa persona coletiva é duplamente marcada pela sua sujeição a forças externas. Ela é ao mesmo tempo sujeita à autoridade do império britânico e às leis e vigilância constante do administrador das terras. O que pretendo mostrar neste trabalho é que os habitantes da vila não só não se opõem à esse duplo status como sujeitos colonizados, como eles internalizam essa condição e efetivamente escolhem identificar-se com a figura do administrador local. O processo de dominação e controle é, portanto, naturalizado e incontestado. Para apoiar essa análise, utilizo os trabalhos de dois autores: as teorias de Michel Foucault sobre disciplina e o conceito de Sigmund Freud de narcisismo de diferenças menores.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: literatura caribenha; pós-colonismo; disciplina.

ABSTRACT: *The powerlessness of being a British colonial subject in the Caribbean island of Barbados is one of the main topics in George Lamming's debut novel In the Castle of My Skin, one that is mirrored in the microcosm of the village, where the subjection to the landlord permeates the lives and culture of the place and its inhabitants. If the village itself is to be considered the main character of the novel, as the author himself proclaimed in the Introduction to the 1983 edition, this collective persona is doubly marked in its subjection to foreign forces. It is at the same time subjected to the rule of the British Empire, and, simultaneously, to the laws and constant vigilance of the landlord. What I intend to show in this paper is that not only do the villagers do not object this doubled status as colonial subjects, they internalize this condition and, in fact, choose to identify with and even idolize the figure of the landlord. The processes of dominance and control become thus naturalized and uncontested. To support this analysis I draw on the works of two authors: Foucault's theories on discipline and Freud's concept of narcissism of minor differences.*

KEYWORDS: *Caribbean literature; postcolonialism; discipline.*

The powerlessness of being a British colonial subject in the Caribbean island of Barbados is one of the main topics in George Lamming's debut novel *In the Castle of My Skin*, one that is mirrored in the microcosm of the village, where the subjection to the landlord permeates the lives and culture of the place and its inhabitants. If the village itself is to be considered the main character of the novel, as the author himself proclaimed in the Introduction to the 1983 edition (1991, p. xxxvi), this collective persona is doubly marked in its subjection to foreign forces. It is at the same time subjected to the rule of the British Empire, and, simultaneously, to the laws and constant vigilance of the landlord. What I intend to show in this paper is that not only do the villagers do not object this doubled status as colonial subjects, they internalize this condition and, in fact, choose to identify with and even idolize the figure of the landlord. The processes of dominance and control become thus naturalized and uncontested. To support this analysis I draw on the works of

two authors: Foucault's theories on discipline and Freud's concept of narcissism of minor differences.

For the philosopher Michel Foucault, the idea of discipline implies the creation of docile bodies; bodies molded through exhaustion, to the finest detail, to reach a mechanical constancy and predictability (2004, p. 118). The docile body is the physical being perfected, controllable, manageable, predictable, and, most of all, useful. In sum, the body is analogous to an instrument that through discipline can be bettered. This kind of control is achieved through a series of ways, for the purpose of this analysis, however, I shall focus on tactics used by the school in the novel as a way to naturalize this dominance over the colonial subjects.

In one passage, for example, the students are organized, in a military fashion, in squads for the Queen's Day parade. If the body can be thought of as a mechanism, it would make sense thus to compare the whole of the squads, comprising about a thousand boys, to an "enormous ship" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 36). The boys could then be seen as the individual clogs and mechanisms that form the larger machine.

The body, in Foucault's analysis, is viewed as a system that through a series of techniques can be bettered close to perfection, which in this sense implies the control of its smallest operations and movements. Not necessarily a conscious control though, the aim is the control triggered by discipline and command. In the parade organized in homage of the Queen's birthday we verify this control exerted by the teachers:

The teachers stepped with great dignity between the rows, inspecting the discipline of the lines, and when they stopped and shouted with military urgency 'Tion!' the boys raised their left legs and brought them down heavily on the ground beside their right heels. Their heads were slightly tilted back, and the small hands pressed earnestly against their sides. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 36)

The students respond almost involuntarily to the commands given and this execution is done instantly. The method for this type of control is the constant repetition of the movement, dividing and perfecting every single section of the operation in order to achieve the utmost precision. Nevertheless, it appears at least in this case, the result is not always satisfactory, as "[s]ome failed to distinguish quickly between right and left and lifted the wrong leg" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 36). Even so, they maintain their discipline, and, despite the fact that "[t]he naked ankles of the neighbouring colleagues collided and hurt[, n]o one wince[s]" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 36).

Discipline and precision are the goals in the school parade, even if only an act. The necessity of this performance is known in the tone of the speech given by the inspector: "We're all subjects and partakers in the great design, the British Empire, and your loyalty to the Empire can be seen in the splendid performance which your school decorations and the *discipline* of these squads represent" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 38, my italics). We can gather from the inspector's words that to be a subject within the Empire it is required a show of loyalty, and this loyalty is best portrayed through discipline and impeccable performance.

The performance of the Queen's birthday parades the docile bodies of the students, molded to fit the standard of discipline required by the Empire. In the course of the

celebration, we witness a series of displays of this desired docility. They begin by the inspection of the classes, where three classes recite a lesson that was being practiced for the past three months. The whole point of this performance is to show how well the students can repeat a few verses memorized: “They recited flawlessly and the inspector applauded. The supervising teacher laughed and snapped his finger at the boys” (LAMMING, 1991, p. 41). As long as it is flawless both inspector and teacher seem content. Following this show of discipline, the next is a “test of voice control”, another mark of the docile body.

One final example taken from this chapter epitomizes the creation of the docile bodies in the institution of the school: the response of the students to the headteacher’s whistle:

The head teacher blew his whistle and the whole school stood and saluted as the inspector walked out. The head teacher blew the whistle again, and everyone sat. He went back to the platform and surveyed the school. [. . .] The head teacher blew his whistle and there was silence. He closed the notes. He remained seated and everyone understood that he was not ready to dismiss the school. When he was ready to do that, he would stand and look serious and sad. The habit had grown among them. Each knew the gestures. Each followed the instructions that were not spoken. When the whistle made its little screeching noise, everyone understood something by it. If he blew it once that meant something, and if he blew it twice that meant something quite different. The habit had formed and settled. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 42, 55)

The students are conditioned to the whistle, and more precisely, the students’ *bodies* are disciplined. They know the instructions to the point where they need not that they be uttered. In sum, they have internalized their status as colonial subjects and a simple trigger can bring forth the expected behavior as part of a mass of docile bodies.

Within the microcosm of the village, Foucault’s work is also particularly relevant, such as when we analyze the characterization of the landlord’s house:

To the east where the land rose gently to a hill, there was a large brick building surrounded by a wood and a high stone wall that bore bits of bottle along the top. The landlords lived there amidst the trees within the wall. Below and around it the land spread out into a flat unbroken monotony of small houses and white marl roads. From any point of the land one could see on a clear day the large brick house hoisted on the hill. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 25)

In the beginning of the description of the house and its location, we are presented with the scenario of a place that overlooks the rest of the village from a privileged position. From the house you can see anywhere below: from the “small houses and white marl roads” till “the limits of the land” in “all directions” (LAMMING, 1991, p. 25). On the other hand, the people from below cannot see the landlord’s house clearly, it is certainly a known presence for the villagers, but there is no clear view of the place, as it is built on a hill, surrounded by wood and high stone walls.

The described topographical characteristic gives the landlord the advantage of seeing without being seen. This aspect is precisely what gives the panopticon model its

appeal to Foucault. In the philosopher's work, discipline through this model is achieved when the subject is seen but does not see, when he or she is an object of information, never the subject of communication (2004, p. 166). The villagers were the object of information in the novel, they were part of the estate of the landlord, part of his property, constantly under his rule and watch, as shown in the following passage:

Pacing the roof, the landlord, accompanied by his friends, indicated in all directions the limits of the land. [. . .] The landlord, one gathered, explained the layout of land, the customs of the villagers and the duties which he performed as caretaker of this estate. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 25-6)

A major part of Foucault's ideas on discipline through vigilance are related to the internalization of this surveillance by the subject. In the panopticon model it is never clear to the prisoner when he is being watched or not. He is seen but does not see. He knows there is always the chance of being watched, but can never tell when precisely that is being done, and so begins to act as though under surveillance at all times. In the quoted passage it is possible to notice this behavior.

The scene describes the landlord on his roof talking to friends and the subject of discussion is unknown, it can be only speculated upon, since the narrator is talking from the villagers' point of view. This is evidenced in the sentence "The landlord, *one gathered*, explained the layout of the land [. . .]" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26, my italics), where "one gathered" places the perspective of the sentence as coming from outside of the conversation, as seen from afar, from the villagers' point of view. The villagers, as subjects of surveillance in this context, naturally assume that the topic of conversation between landlord and friends is the village and its people—themselves. They have internalized the surveillance of the landlord from his high hill house, and thus feel watched at all times.

Foucault also discusses in *Vigiar e Punir* the shift from a model of surveillance and discipline engendered by the figure of the sovereign, as practiced in feudal societies, to a model in which the vigilance is done anonymously (2004, p. 161). This shift is marked by a capillarization of the institutions of power, wherein vigilance and discipline are decentralized (2004, p. 174). In the novel we see this shift represented in the figure of the overseer, who is in charge of "patrolling the land at all hours of the day" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26).

The overseer consolidates to the villagers the feeling of being watched at all times by the landlord. The villagers change their habits because of this surveillance; they internalize it and discipline themselves through it:

A custom had been established, and later a value which through continual application and a hardened habit of feeling became an absolute standard of feeling. I don't feel the landlord would like this. If the overseer see, the landlord is bound to know. It operated in every activity. The obedient lived in the hope that the Great might not be offended, the uncertain in the fear it might have been. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 29)

Once this feeling of constant surveillance is set in the villagers' minds, the need for actual constant surveillance ceases to exist. Discipline and vigilance comes from the villagers themselves, through the internalization of these processes: "[t]he world of

authority existed somewhere along the fringe of the villagers' consciousness" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 28).

The figure of the overseer deserves a little more attention in this context, and with that in mind I draw on Freud's concept of narcissism of minor differences. This mental device is used, according to the psychoanalyst, by people as a coping mechanism to deal with oppressive scenarios. He states his argument clearly in *The Future of an Illusion*:

The narcissistic satisfaction provided by the cultural ideal is also among the forces which are successful in combating the hostility to culture within the cultural unit. This satisfaction can be shared in not only by the favoured classes, which enjoy the benefits of the culture, but also by the suppressed ones, since the right to despise the people outside it compensates them for the wrongs they suffer within their own unit. No doubt one is a wretched plebeian, harassed by debts and military service; but, to make up for it, one is a Roman citizen, one has one's share in the task of ruling other nations and dictating their laws. This identification of the suppressed classes with the class who rules and exploits them is, however, only part of a larger whole. For, on the other hand, the suppressed classes can be emotionally attached to their masters; in spite of their hostility to them they may see in them their ideals; unless such relations of a fundamentally satisfying kind subsisted, it would be impossible to understand how a number of civilizations have survived so long in spite of the justifiable hostility of large human masses. (FREUD, 1927, p. 13)

Instead of feeling oppressed by the landlord, both villagers and overseers feel an emotional connection with, in Freud's terms, the master. Their hostility is geared in turn towards each other: "[e]ach represented for the other an image of the enemy" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26).

The overseer is granted some special favors by the landlord and, in exchange, is in charge of supervising the villagers' affairs. Much like the plebeian in Freud's example, the overseer no doubt shares a lot of the oppression felt by the villagers. Nevertheless, he identifies with the landlord, and views the villagers as a "low-down nigger people" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26). The overseer distances himself from his people, the low-down nigger people, but at the same time acknowledges their shared history by referring to them in the first person as well:

The image of the enemy, and the enemy was My People. My people are low-down nigger people. My people don't like to see their people get on. [. . .] Not taking chances with you people, my people. They always let you down. Make others say we're not responsible, we've no sense of duty. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26-7)

This discrepancy is emphasized by the capital letters in the first "My People", for example. This uncertain position is seen in his speech when referring to the villagers, where he randomly transitions between first and third persons: "[t]hey always let you down [. . .] we've no sense of duty" (LAMMING, 1991, p. 27, my italics). The overseer's narcissism of minor differences helps him evade the dimensions of his underprivileged status as part of "My People", the low-down niggers.

By identifying more with the figure and values of the landlord, he manages to place himself as superior to the common villagers. He never ceases to be one of them however; he never reaches the status of the landlord, as evidenced by the following passage:

Occasionally the landlord would accuse the overseers of conniving, of slackening on the job, and the overseers who never risked defending themselves gave vent to their feelings on the villagers who they thought were envious and jealous and mean. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 26)

The landlord, it appears, regards the overseers as untrustworthy as well. Instead of resenting this status however, the overseer takes comfort in the jealousy and envy the villagers must feel towards him. These are just a few examples of how the narcissism of minor differences helps the overseer rationalize his disadvantaged condition into a victory of sorts.

The villagers, on their turn, also fall into a similar pattern of narcissism of minor differences by identifying with the landlord and focusing their hostility towards the overseers instead. They do not view themselves as necessarily superior to other classes such as the overseers, but they do idealize the figure of the landlord. We see this idealization in several passages: in their admiration of the fact that the landlord has tea in the open air, in the reenactment of the children of the landlord visit to the village, and in the custom of going to bed only after the lights go out in the landlord's house. Thus, the tension remains confined to the relations between villagers and overseers, whereas the landlord remains conveniently safe. We can see this clearly in the following passage:

‘And what the landlord say?’ Bob’s mother asked.
‘Well, I went up to see him next morning,’ Miss Foster went on, ‘but the overseer say he didn’t see much point my coming. He say I know the landlord couldn’t do nothing ‘bout the weather, and that I only go to get him into trouble. I know as well as the world, he say, that the landlord ain’t go do nothing. But it so happen, my dear, the landlord must have heard me mouth from outside, and hearin’ that Foster and me wus the worst in the flood he sent word to the overseer to say let me come in to see ‘im.’ (LAMMING, 1991, p. 33-4)

The overseer tries to prevent Miss Foster from reaching the landlord. In the overseer's view, that is his privilege only, and the villagers should deal with him directly instead of the landlord. Miss Foster, however, does not share this belief; otherwise she would not have bothered going to see the landlord in the first place. She defies the authority of the overseer in hopes of reaching the landlord, which is to say that she defies the established hierarchy of the village.

One could argue that by doing so Miss Foster is expressing the notion that the only real authority figure, in her mind, is the landlord, and that the overseer is but a common villager, like herself, who is temporarily instated as an agent of the landlord, a position which is by no means permanent. She conveys this belief when referring to the overseer and his attitude: “‘You never know what comin’ to you in this world,’ she said, ‘you never know, my child, you down today, you up tomorrow.’” (LAMMING, 1991, p. 34).

I walk down the yard that mornin’ with me head high in the air, an’ not King George on the throne of England was greater than me. When I come out and see the bad-minded black son-of-a-bitch we call the overseer, I

shake my backside (God forgive me) at him, just to let 'im know that I was people too. (LAMMING, 1991, p. 34)

It is interesting to point that if the students grew a habit of discipline and condition through the whistle, a “habit [that] had formed and settled” (LAMMING, 1991, p. 55), the villagers fall into the same pattern of behavior with the landlord and his shared bedtime: a “custom [that] had been established, and later a value which through continual application and a hardened habit of feeling became an absolute standard of feeling” (LAMMING, 1991, p. 29). Thus, we can establish a parallel between the kind of control exerted by the school and the kind exerted by the landlord. In both cases there is a naturalization of the process of discipline, which is then seen as having existed all along. The habit of obeying the whistle is settled as the habit of taking the bedtime cue from the landlord becomes a standard. In true foucauldian fashion, the villagers and students support their own subjugation, as they constitute themselves as subjects in this settled ‘natural’ order of society based in control and discipline, and ran by Empire and landlord.

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